



THE PLUM PAGES

When you think about the advantages—and disadvantages—of having a baby later in life, there is one fact on the plus side that may not readily come to mind: longevity. Research suggests that mothers who have their first baby after the age of 35 are more likely to live longer than the general population.

In 2006, almost 611,000 babies—one out of every seven born in the United States that year—were born to women 35 or over. That's four times the number of children born to older moms a generation ago, in 1976. One in 12 moms today starts her family at 35-plus—in 1970, just one in 100 did. While health care advances mean that American life expectancy is up overall (newborns today can expect to live an average of about 78 years, up from 49 a century ago), later moms enjoy a particularly strong chance at a long and healthy life.

As it turns out, both biological and cultural factors affect longevity related to later motherhood, and may reinforce each other. Socioeconomic circumstances affect our physical experience, creating what's known as a biosocial effect. Women who become moms later are often more educated and financially better off than those who start their families earlier. They are therefore more likely to have access to good health care and to have good information on maintaining health. As a result, they often can often avoid illness or diagnose it earlier and get it treated more effectively than others, contributing in turn to their longevity.


The journal *Nature* published a study in September 1997 comparing two groups of women born a century earlier, in 1896. Research showed that the women in this group of centenarians who had given birth in their 40s were four times more likely to live to be 100 than women who had their last child before 40. The authors hypothesized that a genetic link exists between prolonged fertility and longevity. Their subjects had kids in the 1930s and '40s—before the development of modern fertility technologies—and the authors reason that the women's ability to have kids later might be a sign of a slower mechanism, which delays menopause and eventually contributes to longevity.

A second study, published in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* in March 2005, explored a possible link between the age when a woman first gives birth and her long-term health and longevity. Researchers found that while older moms might face more health issues during pregnancy, especially after age 40, longevity increases indefinitely with a woman's age at first birth—meaning that the older you are when you first give birth, the longer you are likely to live.

Interestingly, in a third study, published in *Social Forces* in September 2002, researchers also found a direct correlation for fathers between delay of first birth and good health, also largely due to biosocial effects (longevity wasn't examined).

Parenthood itself seems to have positive health effects, since parents

tend to take good care of themselves. First-time parents of both sexes between ages 22-39 tend to be healthier than non-parents of the same age, and those who start at 40 or above may be as well. Along with healthy lifestyle choices, psychological factors may also affect the longevity of parents. Among the later moms I've interviewed, many say they're taking extra care of their health in order to be around to see their kids grow up and even to be there to play with their grandkids. Longevity is in part genetic, but it is also informed by behaviors and lifestyle choices. So determined people with a clear sense of why they want to live a long life, who can seek out and act upon health advice (don't smoke, exercise, etc.), have an increased chance of getting there.

Biological and destiny entwine in new ways today: as life expectancy increases, so too do expectations for that life. The trend to later parenthood began a generation ago, with the advent of reliable birth control and as women became more educated and made strides in the workplace. The trend is likely to continue as women increasingly expect a long, full life and as they focus on fitness and healthy life styles as tools for achieving that. If these patterns continue, quite a few later moms may get to be grandmothers down the line. 

ELIZABETH GREGORY is the author of *Ready: Why Women Are Embracing The New Later Motherhood* (Basic Books, 2008) and teaches at the University of Houston. She blogs at www.readymoms.com.

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BY ELIZABETH GREGORY



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